



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: April 27, 2007

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Paul Trudeau, Preservation Administrator  
Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: D-1112: 26 Donnell Street

An application to demolish the house at 26 Donnell Street and construct a new building was received on April 9, 2007. The applicant was notified of an initial determination of significance, and a public hearing was scheduled for May 3, 2007.

### Site

The structure is located on the east side of Donnell Street, in the block between Kelly and Garden Streets. It is a two-story, wood shingled worker's cottage that sits on a high concrete block foundation. A curb cut and driveway are located on the south (right) side of the house.

The structure is sited on a 4,347 square-foot lot (Map 229/Parcel 25). The zoning is Residence B, a two-family and townhouse zone that allows an FAR of .50 and a minimum of 2,500 square feet per dwelling unit. The height limit in this zone is 35 feet. Neighboring properties include 22 Donnell Street, a two-story, single-family residence that was constructed in 2004. This replaced a three-bay workers cottage of 1851 that was similar to #26. The houses at 28 and 30 Donnell Street follow a similar workers cottage plan and design, with 28 Donnell Street constructed in 1968 and 30 Donnell Street constructed in 1858. Although taller, both buildings are two-story, wood-shingled structures with the same front gable orientation as 26 Donnell Street.

### Architectural Description

The workers cottage at 26 Donnell St. was constructed in 1857. This houses shares features characteristic to many other workers cottages built in north and west Cambridge brickyard subdivisions. It has a high basement, originally constructed of brick, few windows on the north facade, and its gable roof is oriented with the gable end to the street. The house currently has wood-shingled walls, a small projecting bay window on the front gable-end facade, and an enclosed entry vestibule on the north side.



North and east sides of 26 Donnell St with #22 (built 2004) in background.

The house underwent major remodeling in the mid 1970s, including the installation of wood shingles over the original clapboards, the addition of a bay window on the front facade, and the enclosure of the entrance porch. The original high brick foundation was replaced by the existing concrete block foundation. The basement windows were removed at that time. A door with a pedimented roof was located on the far left of the front wall, but the entrance was moved to the north wall, perhaps as early as the 1870s or 1880s. The cornice trim has been boxed and soffit vents added. The original corner boards were covered with the shingle siding. With the exception of the bay window, the original fenestration appears to be intact, although several windows have been reduced in size.



East and south sides of 26 Donnell St.

### Current Condition

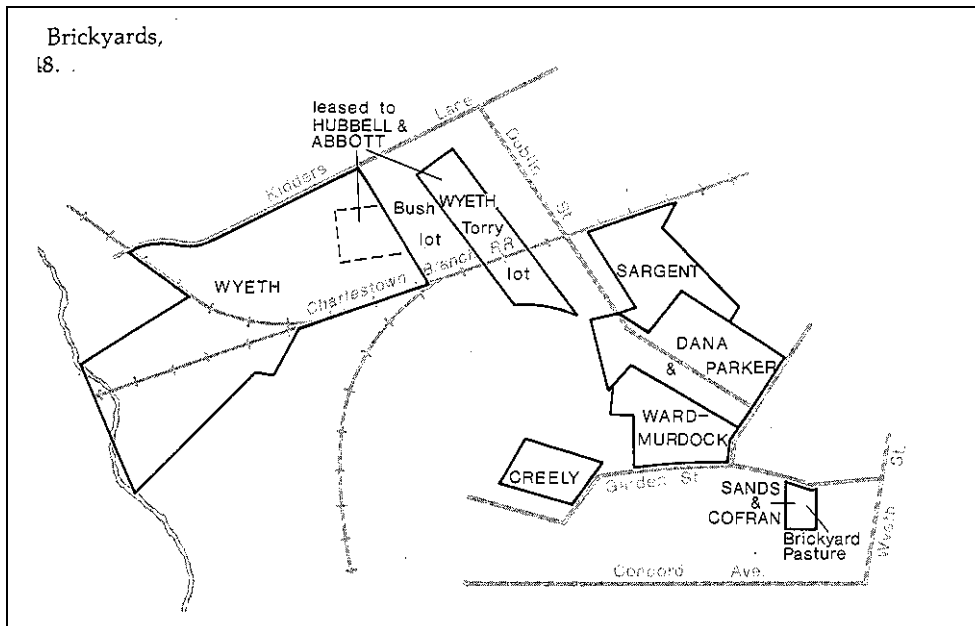
The current condition of the house appears to be good. The wood shingles that cover the original clapboards have been well maintained. The concrete block foundation appears structurally sound. A large wood accessibility ramp covers a substantial portion of the rear yard. Overall, the house has retained its original form and roof shape.

The proposal calls for a 1 ½ story, three-bay, front gable building, approximately 28' high, 21' wide, and 59' long. The building would have wood clapboard siding, six-over-one double-hung windows, two shed dormers, side entry porch, and a trellis over the driveway along the south elevation. The new building would be set back an additional 6' from the existing.

### History

The 1842 extension of the Charlestown Branch Railroad from Miller's River to Fresh and Spy Ponds opened up Northwest Cambridge for the brick industry and for suburban development. Several subdivisions were platted by the owners of the brickyards for the mostly-Irish worker population. Many of the brickyard workers built cottages similar to the one at 26 Donnell Street.

Samuel Cofran and John Sands moved their brickmaking operations from the Charles River to the 18th-century Brickyard Pasture on Garden Street in 1845. Orrin and Tierney Streets now occupy the site of the Cofran and Sands clay pit. Samuel Cofran sold his interest in the business to his partner, John Sands, in 1852. Sands bought the Ward family's brickyard on the other side of Garden Street (now St. Peter's Field) in 1863 and closed the Brickyard Pasture operation in 1866.



Cambridge Brickyards in 1848 (Illustration 34, Cambridge Historical Commission, *Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge: Northwest Cambridge*).

Asa Murdock, a Cambridgeport trader, subdivided the land around the Sands and Cofran brickyard. "Murdock's subdivisions were the first to incorporate

house lots for brickyard laborers, creating a miniature village in which workers homes were set behind those of the brickyard owners." (*Northwest Cambridge*, 51). Murdock purchased the Warland lot, which included the Brickyard Pasture, and part of the Hill estate, along Concord Avenue, and divided the Concord Avenue parcel into five large lots. Behind it, Murdock divided the land into smaller lots around the Sands and Cofran brickyard and laid out the lots along Donnell and Tuttle (R.C. Kelley) streets in 1851 and 1852.

Irish laborers purchased Murdock's lots in the mid 1850s and built up a small village of workers cottages. In 1851, Roger O'Donnell of Cambridge purchased a Lots 25 and 26 of Asa Murdock's subdivision from Murdock for a combined cost of \$385. He built his workers cottage at 22 Donnell Street that same year. It was the first house constructed on the street.

Roger O'Donnell's occupation was listed as a laborer in the 1857 city directory. Roger O'Donnell also owned the adjoining lot at 26 Donnell Street. James O'Donnell, a carpenter, built the house at 26 Donnell Street in 1857. James and Roger's family relationship is not known.

The name of the street changed several times in its early years. It was referred to in the tax rolls and atlases as Murdock, Frog, Tracy, and Turtle streets successively. The city finally settled on the name Donnell Street by 1863, naming it for Roger O'Donnell, the first resident on the street. Ten other houses were built on the street before 1860. Of those, 6 survive.

James O'Donnell resided at 26 Donnell before it was auctioned in 1870, when it was purchased by John Cashman. Cashman, a laborer and gardener, lived in the house until 1899. George Cashman, a printer, is also listed as a resident from 1887 until 1905. The house had several residents between 1907 and 1912, including a laborer, a painter, a steamfitter, and an insurance agent. The house was occupied by Cosimo Colfango (later Carfango), a shoe repairer, and his family from 1912 until 1972.

### Significance and Recommendation

26 Donnell Street is representative of the residential structures built by Irish laborers in Asa Murdock's Warland lot subdivision. It is the staff recommendation that the Commission find the house significant as a characteristic example of a mid-nineteenth century Cambridge worker's cottage and for its broad social associations with the Irish immigrant population in this neighborhood and its associations with the Cambridge brickmaking industry.

The scale and orientation of the proposed new house is consistent with the much-altered house at 26 Donnell Street. The street exhibits an eclectic mix of historic houses with modern additions and alterations as well as one or two examples of recent construction. The Commission should hear testimony from the neighbors and review the plans for replacement construction before making a further determination.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, ISD  
Merek Franklin  
Scott Kenton